

File #

THE DEBATE

In towns known for their beauty,
Greenbush talk has turned ugly

Daphne Cole Keeler blew into her house near Hingham Center, slapped down her car keys and reached for the phone. She dialed her father's house a mile away.

"Guess what I just did?" Keeler sang into the receiver. "Signed a petition against the train."

On the other end of the line, Fred B. Cole howled as if he'd been wounded.

And then father and daughter launched a new round in their ongoing clash over whether commuter rail should be restored on the South Shore.

He favors trains, she fights them. Shared genes, different minds.

"These yahoos against the train, they're just not on this planet," says Cole, 79, a retired broadcaster with a gravelly baritone. "Nothing in history has been able to move mobs of people like a railroad."

Keeler, 48, a homemaker and the third generation of her family to live in Hingham, rolls her eyes.

"He just loves trains," she says. "But time marches on, and things change. Trains may have been fine years ago, but they don't make sense now."

The Great Train Debate rages in town halls, grocery stores and living rooms from Weymouth to Scituate. Friends have split and strangers have bonded, all over whether commuter trains should once again run down the Greenbush branch of the Old Colony Railroad.

The discussion takes on a new urgency starting today, with the opening of a 60-day public comment period that will lead to a decision on whether to go ahead with the project.

"The public dynamic is probably as complicated as it can get on a project like this," says John J. Haley Jr., head of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority and the man charged with building and running Old Colony. "It's going to change the face and life of the affected communities."

Grappling with gridlock

The South Shore is the only major suburban area outside Boston without commuter rail. Trains run north to Rockport, west to

Worcester, southwest to Providence.

The 20,000 South Shore residents who work in Boston or Cambridge have a few public transportation options. They can catch the MBTA's Red Line in Braintree or Quincy, hop a commuter boat in Hingham, or ride a bus.

But for thousands of people, the only choice is their car and the clogged roads to Boston.

The region's main link to the city, the Southeast Expressway, was built in the 1950s for 75,000 cars a day. Today the road bulges with twice that number. "Rush hour" lasts four hours in the morning and three hours in late afternoon.

Growth in southeastern Massachusetts — faster than in any other region in the state — is likely to make things worse.

Planners expect Scituate's population to increase 15 percent in the next 25 years, Hingham's 11 percent, and Marshfield's a whopping 29 percent.

And then there's the Big Dig, the depression and widening of the Central Artery through Boston and construction of a new harbor tunnel to Logan Airport. The work, already under way and continuing into the next century, will likely produce more traffic headaches on the Southeast Expressway.

To try to clear congestion between the South Shore and Boston — and cut auto emissions as required by the federal Clean Air Act — the state is turning to trains.

Heartened by the success of its other commuter rail lines, the MBTA has proposed rebuilding three Old Colony Railroad branches south of Boston.

Trains would run on a single track from South Station to Braintree, where they would switch onto lines running to Middleboro, Plymouth and Scituate.

Officials say restoring the three branches

would remove 6,000 cars a day from local roads.

Work on the Middleboro and Plymouth lines has started, with trains scheduled to roll in December 1996. The federal government is paying 80 percent of the \$503 million bill.

And then there's Greenbush.

The restoration plan

The MBTA plans to spend at least \$215 million to build stations and restore track on the 17.7-mile right of way from Braintree to Scituate's Greenbush section.

Diesel engines pulling six double-decker coaches would snake through historic

neighborhoods, past schools and a bird sanctuary, and right through Hingham Square and other business districts.

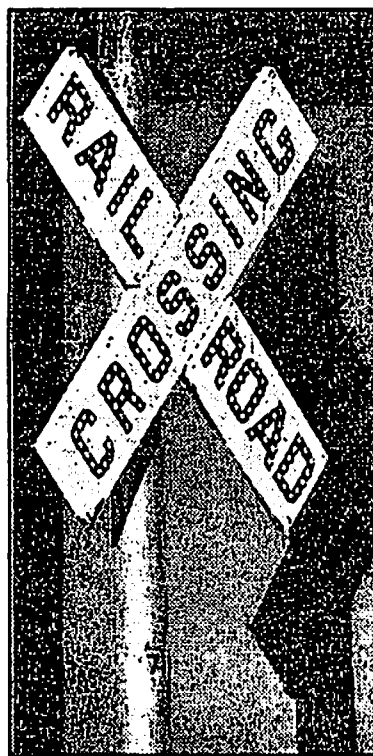
They would roll across suburban streets at 44 locations — many more crossings than on either the Plymouth or Middleboro branches.

Trains would start running from Greenbush at 5:47 a.m. and make a dozen round trips a day, carrying up to 900 people a trip. The last train from Boston would reach the end of the line at 10:46 p.m. The 58-minute trip — at speeds up to 60 mph — would cost \$3.50.

Open air stations with canopies and long concrete platforms are planned at Greenbush, North Scituate, Cohasset, Nantasket Junction in Hingham, West Hingham, East Weymouth and Weymouth Landing. A Quincy station is also being considered. Riders would also be drawn from towns off the line — Duxbury, Hull,

Norwell and Marshfield.

The stations would have paid parking, with lot capacities ranging from 200 cars in West Hingham to 1,000 in Greenbush. Fees haven't



This crossing sign marks the Greenbush line in Hingham.

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Debate has turned ugly in pretty

coastal towns

been set.

At night trains would lay over in Scituate on tracks either off the Driftway or at the town landfill.

The MBTA hopes to begin construction in 1997 and complete work the following year. By the year 2000 the T estimates 3,200 passengers would ride the Greenbush line each weekday, helping ease congestion on Routes 3 and 3A.

What's not yet clear is just how much it would cost to run the railroad.

The MBTA's financial analysis concludes that even if Greenbush is never built it will cost \$4.6 million a year to continue to provide other forms of public transportation on the South Shore.

Adding train service could more than double that bill.

If trains run at ground level through Hingham Square — the cheapest rail plan being considered — the T estimates the annual cost of train service at \$4.6 million. If trains run through a long tunnel south of the square the price tag would be \$4.85 million a year.

And if the cost of paying off construction bonds is also included, the yearly bill balloons to between \$20 million and \$35.6 million.

The T expects the federal government to pay 80 percent of construction and some of the operating cost, just as it will for the other branches. The rest will come from fares and money from the T budget.

Commuters who support the trains say that the cost of restoring rail service would be money well spent, and the need is urgent.

But opponents contend there are cheaper, less disruptive alternatives.

And for more than 10 years, Greenbush has been mired in studies, legal maneuvers and politics.

So much time has passed, the cast of characters has changed and changed again. There have been two governors, three transportation secretaries, two environmental secretaries, two MBTA general managers, and two project managers. Some players have even switched sides.

"I used to be for the train, back in the beginning," says state Rep. Mary Jeanette

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Murray, a Cohasset Republican, who has decided the railroad would be more of a tax burden than a transit boon. "Not anymore."

Talk of restoring rail began a few years after the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad ended Old Colony service in 1959. But it gathered momentum in 1984 when former state Sen. William Golden, D-Weymouth, and other legislators began clamoring for trains.

Former Gov. Michael S. Dukakis, a big transit booster who rode the T to work, became a key advocate. With his backing, the Legislature ordered the T to study the feasibility of restoring rail service south of Boston.

But when it became obvious that Greenbush posed greater environmental problems than the other two lines, it was split off from Middleboro and Plymouth branches for separate study in 1988.

Opposition was concentrated in Hingham, where residents worried that the train would disrupt Hingham Square. As he campaigned for governor in 1990, William Weld promised he would not force a railroad "down the throat" of the South Shore if residents did not want it.

In 1991, nine towns along the Greenbush line held non-binding votes on the issue. Every town but

Hingham voted to restore the line, but the MBTA delayed a decision and continued studies.

Final approval for the Plymouth and Middleboro lines was granted in 1992.

Now the Weld administration says it is ready to hand down a verdict on Greenbush in June.

And the public has one last chance to weigh in. The MBTA will hold three hearings in April and accept written comments during a 60-day period ending May 22.

The agency is bracing for an onslaught.

What's at stake

In the communities where debate is the hottest — Hingham, Cohasset and Scituate — the train fight has become almost a second job for some.

"This isn't a hobby — a hobby is supposed to be fun," said William Grimes, 56, a translator and rail buff, who heads Back on Track, the main pro-train group with about a dozen core members. "This is a cause."

Men and women on both sides spend free hours writing letters, collecting signatures, handing out fliers, and analyzing stacks of state transportation documents.

They've poured personal money into their fight, printing opinions on sweatshirts and lapel pins, house flags and lawn signs. One man has composed an anti-train ditty.

And at some stops along the line, the jousting has turned nasty.

Members of the anti-train Coastal Coalition are jeered as the "Coastal Complainers," while the pro-train people have been derided as "trainiacs."

There have been reports of vandalized signs and harassing mail. Language got so heated at some public meetings that people compared the trains to cancer, a massacre and a "rape of our town."

The communities along the line are among the state's most affluent and their residents among the best educated.

In Cohasset, for example, the average price for a house sold last year was \$257,000. The average household income was \$62,933. And more than half the adults are college graduates.

Hingham, the command post in the battle against the train, is a picture-postcard New England village filled with lovingly maintained historic homes. It boasts quaint shops, Colonial flags billowing from porches and the original Talbot's, the women's clothing store that defines classic upscale American taste.

"You've got a population that is well-educated, able to use the rules of the game that ensure their interests are, if not regarded or protected, at least listened to," the MBTA's Haley says.

Some say that translates into elitism.

"The train is not regarded as properly upscale — it's industrial, urban, for the proletarians who can't drive," says Ross Hall, 54, a Northeastern University professor and Hingham resident whose commute by bus and subway is long enough that he had time to reread Homer's "Illiad."

"I live in a town that has a very good opinion of itself," Hall said. "There is an area of taste and style very much involved in this. It's one of those things you're not supposed to talk about, but it's there."

That suggestion makes Randy Young see red.

"It infuriates me," said Young, 47, co-founder of the Coastal Coalition, whose 1828 Hingham home abuts the tracks. "They call us elitist. We're concerned citizens."

Why has a commuter railroad provoked such intense feelings?

"It's about equality and character of life," says state Rep. Frank Hynes, a Democrat, who represents Marshfield and Scituate and has been a major booster of the railroad.

"On the pro-side, this is an equality issue," he says. "The train would mean the South Shore is no longer a second-class citizen, that it would get the same transportation and economic opportunities that other areas have."

Thanks to a Byzantine formula, several South Shore communities — Marshfield, Pembroke, Duxbury, Hanover and Scituate — pay annual assessments to the MBTA but get no service in return.

Balanced against those who see rail as their right are folks who believe it would be their ruin.

They say it wouldn't be worth the cost, would drive down the value of homes along the tracks, lead to overdevelopment in a region with a fragile environment, and might eventually prompt the MBTA to look to towns for subsidies.

"People see it as a character of life issue," Hynes

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says. "They're afraid the train would mean an end to community life, a kind of village life they want very much to preserve."

While Old Colony passenger service ended in 1959, freight trains never stopped rolling on the Middleboro and Plymouth lines. Communities along those tracks have always been accustomed to trains, which chug mainly through sparsely populated woods, cranberry bogs or industrialized pockets.

But Greenbush is different.

The last freight train went down that line in 1978. Since then, brush has reclaimed the rusting tracks. One car dealer in Braintree uses a section of railbed as a car lot. Gardens and lawns have spilled into the right of way, and children play around old crossing signs. People have grown used to the silence.

Some bought property along the track based on assurances the trains would never return.

When Peter and Cynthia Robb purchased a \$176,000 home in Cohasset four years ago, their real estate agent told them the tracks 200 feet from their house would always lie dormant.

"She said, 'Don't worry about it; the train will never come'," said Peter Robb.

Trees that form a visual barrier at the edge of the Robb yard would be cleared for the train.

"We put all our eggs in one basket in this place," said Robb, 34, a manufacturers' representative who works from a home office facing the tracks.

"We love it here. But I don't know what we're going to do if this railroad is built."

Mitigation measures

The MBTA says it wants to be a good neighbor and would find ways to minimize the disruption the trains would cause.

Railroad ties made from long-lasting wood imported from Cameroon would rest on special rubber mats to absorb sound and soften vibration along certain stretches of rail bed.

Steel rails would be welded to be continuous, eliminating the nostalgic but noisy clickety-clack.

In addition to automatic gates, warning horns would be mounted on poles at 12 crossings where trains would be traveling more than 40 mph. That way, trains wouldn't sound their horns or whistles as they passed houses on the way to a crossing.

Still, the T expects that up to eight homes will be seriously affected by noise from trains while 26 homes and one church will be significantly disturbed by stationary horns and train bells.

The T may try to soundproof those buildings by constructing tall noise barriers or installing double-glazed windows or air-conditioning.

And despite any efforts by the T to minimize vibration, people in 209 houses and 13 apartment buildings would be able to feel the rattling of steel wheels on steel rail. The T says it will be annoying but won't cause structural damage.